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NOTES

THE SEMINAR IN THE COLLEGE

In the issue of this *Journal* for February, 1912, there appeared an article by Professor Seligman under the title, "The Seminar: Its Advantages and Limitations." One point which he developed in this article and which he took occasion to press home at every opportunity was that the seminar is a university method of instruction and as such should not be used in colleges.

The arguments which Professor Seligman presented in support of his contention do not seem to me conclusive. The subject, too, is of such importance to college teachers that a discussion of these arguments will not, I trust, be out of place.

Professor Seligman's thesis can be given in his own words: "The seminar is a strictly university method. When an attempt is made to introduce these methods into the college, the academy, and the high school, not only is it an abuse which will be utterly useless or worse than useless for the student, but one which will tend to cast discredit on the idea itself."

Although reference is made in the paragraph quoted above to the high school and academy, the arguments are mainly directed against the use of the seminar in colleges. For this reason and for the further reason that I am not acquainted with the problems of the high school and academy, I shall leave this part of his thesis untouched.

Argument No. I.—" The seminar is an adjunct to specialization; but specialization, as we have already indicated, is the work of the university, not of a college or high school."

Granting for the moment that specialization is the work of the university, it does not follow that an *adjunct* to specialization is the exclusive property of a university. A library is also an adjunct to specialization, but a college has use for a library. Perhaps the seminar does offer to a man the opportunity to specialize, but I think that most teachers regard it as a method of instruction which enables them to develop in the student the power to do independent thinking. It is in the seminar, if anywhere, that the teacher can make a student realize what constitutes the basis for a sound judgment. And after all, is not this the college education most

"befitting a gentleman," Professor Seligman's criterion of a college course?

I do not think that a categorical answer can be given to the question of whether specialization is the work of a university or not, if by this it is meant that other institutions of learning are to leave the university undisturbed in the enjoyment of this prerogative. Individualization is, in punishment, the slogan of penal reform; and it is certainly as necessary in education. Whether a student should specialize depends not on his location in the hierarchy of educational institutions, but on a great variety of circumstances. This large way of lumping students in groups and classifying them according to some preconceived notion may be a university way of doing things, but it is contrary to the *raison d'être* of the college, particularly the small one.

Argument No. 2.—"The seminar connotes original research; college students have neither the maturity nor the training which are necessary prerequisites to independent thinking."

Has not Professor Seligman given here as reason for the non-employment of the seminar in colleges a fact which is mainly the result of not using it? As well say, a swimming-pool connotes swimming: therefore do not construct swimming-pools among those who do not know how to swim. In other words, the lack of maturity and of training are not, as he seems to imply, a mere question of age, but one primarily of experience, of method, and of training itself. I believe that experienced educators will bear me out in saying that the kind of maturity and training which Professor Seligman demands as prerequisites to independent thinking can be developed very early in life by a system of instruction similar to that employed in the seminar, not only without detriment to the individual but to his immense advantage.

Argument No. 3.—"The seminar implies a certain equality between student and preceptor; the college boy is a manifestly absurd equal for his professor."

This might be a valid objection to the use of a certain type of seminar one, for example, from which the teacher himself expected to derive some advantage. But in case the seminar is strictly for the student's benefit, this question of equality is not likely to arise. The teacher will not be conscious of this feeling, once he has come to see and to understand things from the point of view of those whom he is trying to help. It is simply an attitude of mind, which a teacher must get rid of, any way, sooner or later, or fail in his mission.

Argument No. 4.—"The seminar imports the use of the co-operative method; but how can students, whose linguistic and literary equipment is necessarily of the slightest, successfully employ the arts of comparison and criticism?"

Two objections can be made to this statement. In the first place, it implies that one cannot successfully compare and criticize without linguistic and literary equipment. A command of languages does not enable one to think better or reason more accurately, but only to get at the facts. Now is it true that every subject which may with propriety be assigned in a seminar requires linguistic attainment on the part of the student? Could not any teacher think of several exceptions offhand? Secondly, do graduates as a rule possess this linguistic equipment, and, further, is it true that undergraduates do not? One cannot generalize here. All that can be said, it seems to me, is that some graduates are thus equipped and many are not. Moreover, my observation is that those who spend much time with the languages while undergraduates are not those who take up graduate work in economics. It is not a question of graduate students versus undergraduates, but of individuals versus other individuals.

As to literary equipment, it is also an individual matter, or at most a question of degree. Why not debar graduate students because they do not equal the standard of the professor? It is worth while to recognize that a literary equipment is not a *sine qua non* of seminar work. If it were, what would our university seminars do for membership?

Argument No. 5.—"The seminar involves the employment of the most advanced pedagogical methods; but advanced methods can be used only with advanced students."

In requiring some of her future candidates for the degree of A.B. to pass a comprehensive examination, Harvard has set up a test commonly reserved for the Doctor's degree. There is no a priori method of determining what constitutes an "advanced method" or whether this "advanced method" is fitted only for "advanced students." The test is a pragmatic one. The question is: Are there college students for whom such a method of instruction would be advantageous? This can be settled only by an investigation of the facts, which would, I believe, be favorable to my contention.

Argument No. 6.—"It would be useless because minds in a formative state cannot create. That which is itself being created cannot produce."

Is this to suggest that the minds of college students will cease to

develop on their graduation day? Will not growth possibly continue even after the Ph.D. stage of evolution has been reached? When, pray, is the mind finally created and ready to do business? And how, also, does it get created?

Argument No. 7.—"It would injure the student, because it would lead him to understand that he is doing original work, when he is only rehashing the work of others. It would foster habits of superficiality and vainglory."

In a properly conducted seminar, the work of the student is discussed and criticized; faults are pointed out and suggestions for improvement made. An ideal of good work is held up to him, and, whether he approaches it or not, superficiality is not the final result. Further, it could with good reason be argued that a strict standard of work can be more easily maintained in a college than in a university. The diffidence which a teacher might feel in criticising the results presented by a graduate of age and experience, would not be felt in handling undergraduates. Strictness is accepted as a matter of course in a college, and it is as easy to flunk a man in a seminar as in any other course.

Vainglory in intellectual achievement is not a common fault with American students. In fact, I am inclined to think that this habit ought to be encouraged. It is one quite easily checked and could be turned to good account.

Hash is hash whether served in college or in university; and is it not too commonly the diet of students? What else do they get from newspapers, magazines, books, and (one might add) from classes? The study of a state or local topic, which requires ingenuity in getting at facts from which inferences must be made and comparisons drawn, acts usually as a tonic on the system after such a diet.

Argument No. 8.—"The seminar, moreover, would react on the morale, not only of the student, but also of the teacher. No self-respecting teacher who comprehends what a seminar means could continue to employ these methods with immature students without becoming conscious that he is untrue to his mission. He pretends to be doing what he knows cannot be done. He is dissipating his energies without accomplishing any positive result, except that of more or less conscious deception."

This statement, if true, would make all opposition to Professor Seligman's views of no account for such opposition would naturally come from those who had thus employed the seminar, and they are *ipso facto* abnormal, of impaired morale, and self-deceived.

It has not seemed to me that Professor Seligman's logic was conclusive, or that he was thoroughly conversant with the problems of the colleges, at least not with those of the small ones. The colleges have changed much in the last few years; have to some extent become social forces; and are bringing their work into more direct relation with life. For them, the seminar will prove a successful method of instruction in that it will permit individual treatment and thus enable the teacher to develop whatever possibilities for constructive work a student may possess.

LOUIS N. ROBINSON

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

WASHINGTON NOTES

THE STATE RATE CASES

Probably the most far-reaching decisions relative to the railroad situation that have been rendered during the past two years were handed down on June 9 and June 16 by the Supreme Court of the United States in the so-called "state rate cases." In a general way, the substance of the decisions is to the effect that while Congress has power to regulate rates within a state in so far as these railroad charges constitute an essential part of interstate commerce, Congress has not given absolute or complete power in regard to the matter to the Interstate Commerce Commission or to any other body, and consequently the commission cannot exert what it has not received. So long as the field of rate-making is unoccupied by Congress it may be occupied by the states, and the rates they make are to be upheld unless they involve confiscation of the property of the carrier.

The essential ideas in this decision were expressed by Justice Hughes, who read it in part in the following sentences, the whole decision itself including more than thirty-five thousand words:

The Constitution gives Congress an authority at all times adequate to secure the freedom of interstate commercial intercourse from state control and to provide effective regulation of that intercourse as the national interest may demand.

The commerce that is confined within one state and does not affect other states is reserved to the state. This reservation is only of that power which is consistent with the grant to Congress. The authority of Congress extends to every part of interstate commerce and to every instrumentality or agency by which it is carried on; and the full control by Congress over the subjects committed to its regulation is not to be denied or thwarted by the commingling of interstate and intrastate operations.